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CIA spooks, profs: back together again

Though you'd probably get an argument from those who believe that the only good CIA is a dead CIA, the agency's renewed interest in academe bodes well for its ability to prevent embarrassing lapses in its analysis of affairs in foreign capitals. That might be, your dissenters might agree, but in their eyes a knowledgeable CIA is undesirable. Flasco and blunderation is what they wish upon the "satanic imperialists" at the CIA.

Still, the CIA has its analysts out picking the brains of professors at universities across the country. Ten years ago, most professors would not get within spitting distance of a CIA employee. Today things are changed, according to the CIA's deputy director for intelligence, Robert Gates. Referring to the number of issues about which the agency is seeking advice from professors, Mr. Gates

said, "We're working (with professors) on an awful lot of issues we weren't working on 10 years ago."

Fortunately, the atmosphere on campus has changed radically. True, some students still raise their fists when, as at Brown University three semesters ago, CIA recruiters actually set foot on campus. But most of the new contacts involve trips to professional seminars on, say, the budget situation in Papua/New Guinea, or funds for academic projects.

The new chumminess between scholars and spooks is not without risk of serious impropriety. A minor scandal erupted at Harvard recently when it was learned that a professor had accepted some CIA support for a seminar and a book on Islamic fundamentalism in return for a CIA veto over aspects of the book's contents, which is against Harvard regulations. As it turns out, the professor had

informed Harvard administrators of his deal with the CIA, but the university had done nothing about it.

There is certainly room to question how far the CIA should venture into academe, just as there are sensible reasons for CIA concern over what academics might publish as a result of their own access to information from the CIA. The agency is allowed to operate outside U.S. borders.

Still, it would seem ridiculous to argue against all efforts by the agency to probe the minds of men and women more learned in many subjects than its own analysts. "What we are after is people who will challenge us constructively, offer us a different perspective, who will stir up the pot a bit," said Mr. Gates. "Large bureaucracies like (the CIA) have difficulty promoting imagination and creativity."